

Oxford-UdK Berlin Partnership in Arts and Humanities

**Was gibt's da zu lachen?  
Humor im deutschsprachigen Theater der Nachkriegszeit**

**A Comic Twist on Memory?  
Humour in Postwar German-Language Theatre**

Report

November 2025

## Project Description

This creative collaboration used theatre to think critically about the post-war era in Germany and Austria in new ways. To what extent did playwrights, actors, and audiences process or suppress the consequences of Nazism and World War II in the space of the theatre? More specifically, we explored the role played by humour in war-related plays written between 1945 and 1961.

We chose four plays. Fritz Kortner's *Donauwellen* (1949) is set in post-war Vienna and explores themes of opportunism, survival instinct, and moral ambiguities. It deals with the complexity and hypocrisy of ordinary people who had been complicit with the Nazi regime. Günter Eich's *Der Tiger Jussuf* (1952) is a West German radio play. This surrealist piece thematises difficult relationships, masculinity, and violence in post-war society. *Die Schlacht von Lobositz* by Peter Hacks (1956) is an East German anti-war comedy set in the beginning of the Seven Years War and based on the true story of a reluctant soldier. The play exposes unjust, class-based hierarchies in the context of warfare. 1956 was also the year the German Democratic Republic formally founded its army, the National People's Army (NVA). Finally, Erich Kästner's *Die Schule der Diktatoren* (1956) is a satire about political power, propaganda, and the disenfranchisement of the people. Written as a universal story and explicitly differentiated from Nazi Germany, the play is nonetheless inspired by the rise of fascism in 1930s Germany.

The long-term goal of this project is to develop a full-scale theatre performance involving the Universität der Künste, the University of Oxford, and Oxford-based theatre professionals and developed for the Schwarzman Centre's Cultural Programme. The UdK-Oxford seed-funding grant was used to organise an exploratory theatre workshop in Berlin that brought together UdK acting students, UdK writing students, and Oxford German Studies students to engage with and discuss the plays introduced above, and to imagine what translating a historically rooted comedy into a modern-day production might look like.

The project leads are Dr. Katharina Friege and Prof. Enrico Stolzenburg. In her research on humour after the Second World War, Katharina explores how laughter and humour intersected, overlapped, or contradicted wider cultural narratives and national myths of war. Enrico is a theatre director who has made an international name for himself directing contemporary works and who teaches as a professor in the UdK's acting programme.

## Preparatory Research

In July 2025, Katharina went on an archival trip to the Deutsches Literaturarchiv (DLA) in Marbach am Neckar, where she undertook research on German-language comedies written between 1945 and 1961. The large and specialised library and expert advice of Marbach-based researchers was invaluable. In addition, we researched post-war comedies from our home institutions in Oxford and Berlin.

There were not many war-related comedies produced during this time, but the more we looked, the more we found. Some were written by Nazi playwrights in the post-war era, which we dismissed from our selection given that the long-term project is to develop a stage production. Others were written in exile just as the war was ending and debuted in its immediate aftermath, including Franz Werfel's *Jakobowsky und der Oberst* (1944), which made it onto our 'shortlist'. *Donauwellen*, one of the plays we ultimately selected, was performed only once in

1949 and then disappeared from the theatre landscape until the mid-1980s. We selected eight plays and one film that we felt were interesting and worth discussing, and that we felt covered a range of themes and humoristic styles.

These were (in chronological order):

- Franz Werfel, *Jakobowsky und der Oberst* (1944)
- Herrmann Mostar, *Der Zimmerherr* (1946)
- Günter Neumann, *Schwarzer Jahrmarkt. Eine revue der Stunde Null* (1947)
- Günter Neumann, *Ich war Hitlers Schnurrbart. Eine groteske Parabel* (1949)
- Fritz Kortner, *Donauwellen* (1949)
- Günter Eich, *Der Tiger Jussuf* (1952)
- Peter Hacks, *Die Schlacht von Lobositz* (1956)
- Erich Kästner, *Die Schule der Diktatoren* (1956)
- Wolfgang Neuss, *Wir Kellerkinder* (1960)

Over several meetings both in person and online, we narrowed down our final selection of plays to the four comedies introduced above: *Donauwellen*, *Der Tiger Jussuf*, *Die Schlacht von Lobositz*, and *Die Schule der Diktatoren*.

#### Four Comedies

Fritz Kortner, *Donauwellen* (1949)

*Donauwellen* plays on the tradition of the 'Volksstück'. It begins shortly after Vienna has been taken over by the Soviet Army on 13 April 1945 during the Second World War. The events develop over several months, tracing the post-war period in the city of Vienna. The play is set in Alois Duffeck's barbershop and salon in the fictional Jasomirgottesgasse, located in the heart of the city. Different characters respond to their rapidly changing personal circumstances to reveal a complex web of contradictory emotions in the face of Allied liberation. Popular conformity, the persistence of nationalism, opportunism, and the struggle for survival are important themes.

Günter Eich, *Der Tiger Jussuf* (1952)

*Der Tiger Jussuf* is a radio play by Günter Eich from 1952. Eich rewrote the play quite extensively, and there is a second, modified version from 1962, which offers the listener more explicit cues and narrative guidance. The play is full of irony and surrealism, so while there is humour, it is not a comedy in the traditional sense. Nor is historical context made as explicit as in the other three plays. *Der Tiger Jussuf* has something fairy-tale-like about it – a tiger takes over various human characters, or perhaps the humans transform into the tiger. These transformations shake up relationships, especially between romantic couples. Themes include masculinity, human relationships, and an inner confusion of identity.

Peter Hacks, *Die Schlacht von Lobositz* (1956)

This play is doubly historical: First, it is set during the Seven Years' War from 1756 to 1763 and second, it debuted the same year as the NVA was founded in the GDR (exactly 200 years later). The plot follows the farmer Ulrich Bräker who was conscripted into the Prussian Army as a reluctant mercenary and who eventually finds the courage to desert the army and defy his superiors. Bräker was a real person, and Hacks based his play on Bräker's autobiography,

entitled *Lebensgeschichte und natürliche Abenteuer des armen Mannes im Tockenburg* (written between 1781 and 1785). The play hints at issues surrounding militarisation and the misuse of power against the interests of the common man.

Erich Kästner, *Die Schule der Diktatoren* (1956)

*Die Schule der Diktatoren* is a satire of violent dictatorship and authoritarian systems of power. Kästner emphasised the universality of the play but acknowledged that it had been inspired by the recent Nazi past. The plot follows a dictator figure who is revealed to be one in a succession of puppet-like impersonators. Real power is concentrated in the hands of a few high-ranking policymakers. When one of the dictator impersonators attempts to stage a coup, change seems to be around the corner only to be quashed by a new authoritarian system. Kästner highlights several key topics including political assassination, repression and violence, and the power of mass media.

### The Workshop

The workshop took place at the Universität der Künste in Berlin from 10 to 12 October 2025. Katharina and Enrico led the workshop. Participation was voluntary and students from both the UdK and Oxford signed up in advance. In fact, we were oversubscribed.

In the workshop, we worked through three of the plays in their entirety. We read *Donauwellen* and *Die Schule der Diktatoren* as a group, with different people taking on characters. We listened to a recording of *Der Tiger Jussuf*. At various points, we took breaks to discuss the course of the play, the characters and their motivations, the structure and tone, and the wider historical context. At the end of each individual play, we broke into smaller discussion groups to play with the idea of a modern-day adaptation. Each discussion group summarised their ideas to the whole workshop.

We explored and returned to three guiding questions over the course of the workshop:

1. What, if anything, makes this play funny?
2. What themes, impressions, motifs interest or strike you most?
3. Which topics are purely historical, which have continuing relevance, and why?

It was our aim to make the workshop feel like a creative and collaborative space. Working with the students was not only a real pleasure, but it also added important new voices and perspectives into the mix. All participants were engaged and offered insightful comments and contributions to the group discussions.

### Future Project Development

In the long run, it is our goal to develop a full-scale theatre production that combines German twentieth-century history and comedy for the Schwarzman Centre's Cultural Program. This would mean reinforcing the cooperation between the two institutions, involving students from Oxford and the UdK, and also building relationships with Oxford-based theatre companies and professionals. Our next steps are to decide on a production and to secure funding.